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Municipalist Syndicalism: Organizing the New Working Class

By Alexander Kolokotronis



A municipalist revolution is impossible without the support and cooperation of labor unions. In some cases, labor unions might themselves take the lead in promulgating a municipalist shift. To effectively pursue this path, the left must grapple with the diverse composition and structure of the working class — joining calls for union democracy with nascent municipalist movements. Experiments in participatory democracy can then be tried and tested at the intra-union level, nourishing possibilities for subsequent municipal-wide implementation.

Developments in the United States and Spain are showing that municipalist participatory platforms can win. Examples include the mayoral election of Chokwe Lumumba Jr. in Jackson, Mississippi on a three-pronged platform of building peoples' assemblies, a solidarity economy and a network of progressive political candidates. A number of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) candidates are running on platforms of expanding participatory democracy and the workers' cooperative sector. Municipalist movements are proliferating as a means of resisting Donald Trump and a rising far-right.

This comes at a time when labor unions are in decline, with internal democratization needed for revitalization. To raise their appeal, stimulate favorable public opinion and extend their influence, labor unions must also provide and act on a political vision. This is a vision of attaining power at the municipal level, and working to transform it.

WHICH WORKING CLASS?

While there have been positive developments in fomenting a municipalist movement, other segments of the left are grappling with Trump's victory and liberal Democratic failure in different ways. In the United States, a number of analysts locate the source of these developments in the forty-year decline of the condition of the working class. Advocating a Sanders-like social democratic program in Jacobin Magazine, Connor Kilpatrick writes that "The working class is central to a meaningful progressive politics because they have the numbers, the economic incentive and the potential power to halt capital in its tracks." On its face, this is not inconsistent with municipalism. The differences in analysis and political program emerge from highlighting and reifying particular sections of the working class.

commitment.

Thus, as DSA turns towards creating a Democratic Socialist Labor Commission (DSLCL), it would be wise to consider how union democracy can help flow into the construction of a municipalist socialism. Subsection 3 of the priorities resolution states that “DSA is committed to building democratic labor unions that empower and activate their rank-and-file members.” Putting forward a mix of reforms that include union dues participatory budgeting and common good bargaining adds programmatic weight to this statement.

A DSLCL that “coordinates chapter-based labor branches” can do so along such lines, on the premise that if democratic socialism is to be implemented on the national level it must be first experimented with within our unions and within our cities. DSLCL can help materially articulate a municipalist syndicalism. A socialism in which democratized unions take leadership, by constructing intersecting layers of self-governance and self-management at the municipal and regional level. Democratization of unions — and union capacity deployed-today towards democratization of the workplace — would remake unions into a “bridgehead” to a participatory society.

The seeds of a municipalist program already lie within the labor movement’s capacity. Once planted, the seeds of municipalism can grow from a democratization of the union to a democratization of the city itself — along direct and participatory lines. It is not the only pathway to radical municipalism, but it is the promise of the new working class. It is the promise of socialist-led union democracy in the twenty-first century.

Clearly there are good reasons to recognize the continued relevance of white workers, as Kilpatrick does. The majority of today’s working class is white. It cannot be denounced as some angry “outnumbered minority” — The New York Times itself was leading with post-election headlines: “Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites.” Leftists point to the Democratic Party presidential primaries demonstrating that the white working class overwhelmingly supported Sanders’ social democratic agenda over Clinton’s neoliberalism. Liberal Democrats have ignored the material circumstances of the white working class. And so it goes that “Donald Trump didn’t flip working-class voters. Hillary Clinton lost them.” Some socialists believe this calls for an unabashed return to class politics. That identity politics has held back the left, and we are now paying for it with the rise of the far-right.

Yet the working class is comprised of more than just its rural white male contingent. Such a discourse risks reducing “the working class” to “rural white people.” Acknowledging this also means grappling with the fact that Bernie Sanders did not do well among black voters. Furthermore, the working class does not only reside in Appalachia or Lake Charles, Louisiana, and it is not only white and male. The working class also resides in Oakland and Jersey City, and it can be black, brown and of any gender (which is not to erase racial diversity outside of cities) and work in sectors outside of industrial manufacturing.

As Gabriel Winant writes in *Dissent*, “while the idea of a new working class is not yet widely accepted, its distinguishing features are, on their own terms, familiar. We can reduce them down roughly to feminization, racial diversification and increasing precarity: care work, immigrant work, low-wage work, and the gig economy.” A recent study has found that “union membership as a share of total employment, by race and ethnicity” is highest among black workers. The same study notes that the US working class will be majority people of color by 2032. It finds that “the prime-age working-class cohort, which includes working people between the ages of 25 and 54, is projected to be majority people of color in 2029.”

There are other indications that this is where the future of progressive politics lies. Care economy occupations comprise an increasing segment of the emerging worker

cooperative sector. Cooperative Homecare Associates, the largest worker cooperative in the United States, operates in the care economy. This democratic employee-owned firm contains over 1,500 worker-owners, and is unionized by SEIU. Initiatives, such as the Cleveland Model, the NYC Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative, and San Francisco Bay Area startup development also focus on developing care economy enterprises, with a number owned and operated by immigrants and based in large municipalities.

The care economy is growing at a tremendous rate. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “healthcare occupations and industries are expected to have the fastest employment growth and to add the most jobs between 2014 and 2024.” In a number of states universities and their affiliated hospital systems are the largest employers. Much of the employment is centered in growing metropolitan regions, with working class people of color. The largest cities in the United States are among the most racially and ethnically diverse areas.

Acknowledging all of this is to identify where the left can build power right now. In the immediate term, the left’s power does not lie in white working class rural settings. If the left works for it, it lies in the cities, and among a multi-racial working class. A sector of the working class that has faced severe discrimination, including under New Deal policies which reified racial hierarchies — policies that are still held up as part-and-parcel to the golden age of US progressivism. Nonetheless, a return to social democracy would require input mechanisms and shaping from those who have been historically disenfranchised.

This does not mean abandoning the white working class — groups like Red Neck Revolt are proving effective in organizing the rural white working class along anti-fascist lines. Rather, the question being posed here is what role labor unions can play and where they can be most effective. Embracing an intersectional socialist agenda right now means unions must pursue a politics that channels resources into centering the voice and power of women and people of color.

The choice, then, is not solely between white-centric social democracy or Clintonian

seeking to convert their enterprise with those who can help carry out the conversion. Retirees are also a significant segment of the voting base. Through lending legal and fiscal capacity for converting businesses to democratic employee-ownership (this itself is a tremendous opportunity considering that nearly 25 million workers are employed in businesses susceptible to conversion), soon-to-be-retirees will have found an exit-option.

Municipalist takeover by unions would then enable redeployment of this legal capacity — with greater resourcing, staffing and generalized support. With an autonomous federation of workers’ controlled businesses, democratized unions would have another ally possessing extensive fiscal resources — an ally operating according to socialist relations of production.

A number of unions in eds & meds already see the municipality as a key site of political engagement. In New Haven, a number of current or former UNITE-HERE organizers or officers have been elected to the Board of Alders (effectively, the City Council). There, a coalition of unions and community groups successfully called on Yale University to hire five-hundred residents from communities of color. The Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) has run multiple teachers as candidates for the city’s Board of Alders and mayoralty. It has also publicly forged ties with community groups, earning the CTU’s reputation for practicing “social movement unionism.” Power is being leveraged in these cities not only for organized labor as it stands, but the city as a whole. Labor unions are already heading this way. The key is imbuing this movement with a democratized form, imperative and character.

DSA AS POTENTIAL PLATFORM FOR MUNICIPALIST SYNDICALISM

There is another question: through what inter-union platforms could this be coordinated. One potential organization is Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the fastest growing socialist organization with 45,000 members. Countless members have demonstrated a commitment to an intersectional socialism as well as one focused on the labor movement. As shown by the intersectional character of participatory budgeting and other processes above, municipalist syndicalism gives content to this

that demand common good solutions to win progressive revenue and advance community fights such as affordable housing, universal pre-k and expanded after school programs, and improved city services, as just a few examples”). Such Common Good Bargaining frameworks would be more thoroughly co-designed, which itself would flow out of experiences of co-design and co-production practiced in project development phase of the labor union participatory budgeting process.

There are other ways that democratic union processes can be designed for intersectional ends. One way of explicitly doing this could be through a participatory mapping process. Here members themselves bring their “local situated knowledges” and “standpoints” to the mapping of a workplace or work-location. For example, a number of public schools in the United States fall short of meeting requirements prescribed by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Even when accessibility grievances are lodged through unions, such grievances either fall through the union’s bureaucratic cracks or are simply ignored. Participatory mapping processes could be formally linked to what ends up on the bargaining table between unions and employers. Member participation would achieve results by substantively reorienting unions towards intersectional concerns, while also informally pressuring union leadership to act accordingly.

Participatory budgeting and mapping processes within labor unions would also prepare unionized workers to take part in municipal-level participatory budgeting processes. Beyond cultivating trust, this would train union members to operate large-scale participatory budgeting processes in preparation for significant scaling and expansion of participatory democratic processes. Competencies developed within unions would be readily available for transference and scaling at the municipal level. With all of these initiatives being inclusive of non-labor community groups, coalitions would be in place and there would be a backlog of trust-generating experience of having worked together.

Working with this variety of community groups and associations — such as retirees — unions can also streamline the creation of a sector of workers’ controlled enterprises. Soon-to-be retirees hold a stock of businesses that could be converted to democratic employee-ownership. Retiree associations possess networks that could connect those

neoliberalism. There is another politics to choose, a fusion of the best of the US left: the participatory politics arising in Jackson, Mississippi, with the municipal-focus of UNITE-HERE in New Haven, Connecticut. This third choice — this fusion — is municipalist, participatory and syndicalist.

A NEW MUNICIPALIST SYNDICALISM

Incipient anti-fascist coalitions hold the potential to call a new politics into existence in the United States. Socialist municipalism could be a means for both resisting the far right as well as articulating a libertarian socialist alternative. While there is much to critique in Bookchin — even from a municipalist angle — the basic guiding principles hold.

Within cities, Bookchin discusses the possibilities of advancing a minimum program and a maximum program. The former meets demands for improved welfare of residents and generates pockets of direct participation and empowerment that can serve as stepping stones to more wholesale institutional transformation. The maximum program is one in which people power is at the center of this institutional transformation: here, decision-making power is transferred from municipal-level representative institutions to that of direct-democratic assemblies.

Municipalist syndicalism offers an enduring platform and long-term strategy for ensuring that the multi-racial urban working class possesses voice and power. While it is easier to declare than to set into actual motion, unions appear to be best positioned to bring strength to a municipalist turn, to be an agent of participatory democracy; best positioned to prepare themselves to pursue the municipalist hypothesis, and follow-through on the conclusions drawn from it.

One major reason: money. Unions hardly have the resources to compete with capitalists at the national level. Nonetheless, they do have substantial resources and autonomous control over them. In addition to money, labor unions own buildings, schools, meeting spaces and a variety of other resources. The question is at what level these resources could be most effectively used. With a fiscal base totaling \$8.6 billion, unions are the one force that can mount successful municipalist drives across the United States —

specifically, a coordinated movement of municipalist efforts in multiple municipalities.

The strength of municipalism lies in its locality, in its attention to the particular — an attention that some of the best unions have and harness. But to offset against at least some pressures, it must also find strength in its multiplicity. That is to say, not just the multiplicity that lies within a given locale, town or city, but the multiplicity that is at the core of notions of confederalism.

I call this type of politics municipalist syndicalism because, although it is socialistic and premised on multi-tendency coalitions, different chief agents will arise in different contexts. In the context of unionized “eds & meds” metropolitan regions, the unionized “new” working class can be that agent. Where will the meetings be held? Who will have resources to establish an effective communications system? Who will do the canvassing (whether for candidates or as part of a participatory process)? Unions can do a substantial part of this work. And in that way, it is syndicalist: unions deploying their self-organized power and resources towards a political end. Yet, it is municipalist in that organized labor’s eyes are turned for more far-reaching transformation. A transformation beyond the point-of-production.

Before this can take place, however, there must be a democratization of unions themselves.

COMMUNITY-FOCUSED UNION DEMOCRACY

As I noted in a previous piece for ROAR Magazine, concepts and designs of union democracy have remained quite thin. Participatory budgeting for union dues can be part of a union’s democratized design. I have argued that participatory budgeting can help stimulate class consciousness, serve as a means for worker education (particularly in the area of self-management), and help transform bureaucracy into a collaborative iterative form of administration.

Participatory budgeting also has an intersectional character. It has been a forum for including and empowering immigrants. It has also increasingly become a staple of the Movement for Black Lives. Public Agenda’s research of PB in North America finds

that “black residents were overrepresented or represented proportionally to the local census among voter survey respondents.” In an official statement addressed to Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Black Youth Project 100 called “for a participatory city budget in which the public has the power to defund the Chicago Police Department and invest those dollars and resources in Black futures by setting a living wage with union representation.”

BYP 100 member Rossanna Mercedes writes that she has “witnessed first hand the organizing power of black people in participatory budgeting.” Mercedes recounts that “formerly incarcerated persons, mostly Black men, organiz[ing] together through a local community based organization and decide how to spend tax dollars in their neighborhoods. Black youth let[ting] their neighbors know about the process by knocking on doors, taking the vote to them to build support for projects they’ve proposed for their communities.” Mercedes goes further, imagining “what we could do with Community Development Block Grants, the billions in federal funding for those of us in low income communities.”

Participatory budgeting for a labor union could potentially help ground and scale this work, and also connect to it. It can be an organizational form that materially connects labor unions to community groups, with the backing and creative leadership of membership. It can create the necessary alliances for a real municipalist program and movement. There can even be cross-union and cross-local participatory budgeting processes, reminiscent of the regional assemblies once held by the Knights of Labor in the nineteenth century.

Unions can even help community groups achieve their targets, by deploying both their fiscal capital as well as social capital. A labor union participatory budgeting process, for example, could include a budget category of external or “community relations.” Union members could propose ideas and craft projects that directly benefit or work together with the larger community.

This dimension of a union participatory budgeting process could then flow into a democratized “Bargaining for the Common Good” initiatives (partnerships between labor unions and community-based organization that pursue “broad based campaigns